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Law School News: A Fond Farewell To Dean Michael Yelnosky 06-26-2020

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June 26, 2020

Law School News

A Fond Farewell to Dean Michael Yelnosky

A visionary leader and champion of social justice in legal education, Yelnosky steered RWU Law from the wake of the Great Recession through the upheavals of the COVID-19 pandemic, continually positioning the school to remain “aggressively relevant.”

June 26, 2020 Michael M. Bowden



Faculty and staff bid a social-distance farewell to outgoing RWU Law Dean Michael Yelnosky, via car parade on the rainy Tuesday afternoon of June 30, 2020, his last day on the job. Image Credit: Nicole Dyszlewski

On Tuesday, June 30, 2020, Dean Michael J. Yelnosky will step down as the fifth dean of Roger Williams University School of Law, concluding an extraordinary six-year tenure in that role. A visionary leader and champion of social justice in legal education, Yelnosky has dedicated 27 years to the law school, both as a founding faculty member and as dean.

“I am grateful to so many for this opportunity, and for supporting and working with me as dean,” he said. “Whether I was working on new programming, fundraising, diversity and inclusion, board engagement, or attracting and retaining an excellent faculty and staff, I tried to keep the needs of our students and alumni front of mind.”

Yelnosky's deanship marked an important period of growth for the school. At a time when many law schools were retrenching in the wake of the Great Recession, Yelnosky focused on positioning RWU Law to remain “aggressively relevant.”

Under his leadership, the school developed new and [innovative academic programming](#), while opening an experiential learning campus in Providence, [reducing tuition](#), and taking significant steps toward making the school [more diverse and inclusive](#). In the process, Roger Williams became the most affordable private ABA-accredited law school in the Northeast.

“Instead of being back on our heels, we started to declare the ways in which we were not like other law schools,” Yelnosky said. “It gave us, I think, the sense that we could be more than just passive observers of our market.”

His approach did much to solidify and grow confidence in and support for the school among students and alumni, as well as the broader bench and bar.

“A respected scholar, beloved teacher, and skilled ambassador to the Rhode Island bar and judiciary, Michael Yelnosky has set us on the course we will follow for decades to come.”

~ Judge William E. Smith, U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island

“With his deep commitment to public interest law and social justice issues, Michael Yelnosky has provided transformational leadership in guiding RWU Law,” said Judge William E. Smith of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island, chair of the law school’s Board of Directors. “He is a respected scholar, beloved teacher, and skilled ambassador to the Rhode Island bar and judiciary, who has strengthened the law school’s reputation and relationships throughout the legal field. He has set us on the course we will follow for decades to come.”

A widely recognized expert on employment and labor law, as well as dispute resolution and judicial selection, Yelnosky plans to stay on as a full-time professor at RWU Law after he steps down as dean. Effective July 1, 2020, his successor and [RWU Law’s sixth dean, Gregory W. Bowman](#), will take the reins.

Yelnosky earned his B.S. degree from the University of Vermont and his J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.

‘A Rock Star’

Voices from across the University community and throughout the state’s bench and bar are united in their praise for Yelnosky’s contributions as dean of RWU Law.

“For six years I have had the privilege of working side by side with Dean Yelnosky on behalf of the law school,” Judge Smith noted. “Michael has been a tireless advocate of the law school within the University, the Rhode Island legal community, and the rapidly expanding circles of the law school’s influence in the business, nonprofit and educational communities.”

Smith added, “He is universally respected and liked and has elevated the law school in countless ways. Above all, and most crucially, Michael has been a dean who always puts students first. Through good times and challenges alike, Michael has been a selfless, dedicated, kind — and occasionally very humorous! — leader, as well as a friend to everyone at RWU Law. We all owe him a deep debt of gratitude, and I know I speak for the entire Board when I say I hope he will be with us for many years to come.”

“Michael’s warmth permeates the entire institution, setting just the right tone for a learning environment in which curiosity and hard work are rewarded and student accomplishments are truly celebrated.”

~ Professor Andrew Horwitz, Assistant Dean for Experiential Education

The Honorable Paul A. Suttell, Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, and a member of the Board, spoke admiringly of Yelnosky’s leadership in difficult times.

“It is perhaps fitting that Michael, an original member of the faculty, has guided the law school during some very difficult times in legal education, and he has done so with equanimity and grace,” Chief Justice Suttell said. “Although the current pandemic prevents a proper celebration of his six-year tenure as dean, it cannot diminish his many achievements.”

Suttell went on to list several of these achievements.

“Michael has positioned the law school as a leader in experiential law, clinical programming, and public interest law,” he said. “He has strengthened the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the law school and the Rhode Island Judiciary. And his commitment to diversity and inclusion will no doubt reap benefits to the legal culture in Rhode Island for years to come. It has been a pleasure working with Michael and I look forward to his continued friendship.”

Speaking from a faculty standpoint was Yelnosky’s longtime friend and colleague, Professor Andrew Horwitz, Assistant Dean for Experiential Education.

“Michael has made extraordinary contributions to RWU Law since its inception — as a faculty member, as an associate dean, and ultimately as a dean,” he said. “His humble and personable approach is exactly what the school needed to guide us through some very turbulent times.”

Horwitz explained, “Michael is thoughtful and open-minded, yet clear, firm, and decisive when that form of leadership is required. His warmth permeates the entire institution, setting just the right tone for a learning environment in which curiosity and hard work are rewarded and student accomplishments are truly celebrated. His shoes will be very hard to fill.”

On a personal note, Horwitz added, “Michael has been a good friend, a supporter, a confidant, and a trusted advisor to me for over 25 years. Working with him has been a great joy and having him as a friend an even greater one.”

Linn Foster Freedman, a partner with Robinson+Cole, former member of the Board, and namesake of the law school’s Freedman Classroom, expressed admiration for the ways in which Yelnosky prioritized students.

“As dean, Michael was deeply committed to the law students,” she said. “He was always focused on the students’ experiential learning, well-being, and development. He was a strong, yet gentle, caring and fun leader of the law school.”

These characteristics, Freedman noted, also extended to the community at large.

“Not only was Michael committed to the students, he was also committed to the law school as a whole,” she said. “He was laser-focused on improving LSAT scores, providing employment opportunities for students, developing relationships with the judiciary and members of the bar, and improving the reputation of the law school. He was a rock star and we will miss him so much.”

Mission, Spirit and Culture

Speaking for many students and alumni was Nicole Benjamin ’06, now vice-chair of RWU Law’s Board and a shareholder at Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C. in Providence.

“There are many who can take credit for impacting the lives of RWU alumni, but very few who can take credit for impacting the life of **every** RWU alumnus,” Benjamin said. “As a founding faculty member, Dean Yelnosky has made an indelible mark not only on RWU Law but also on the lives of every one of its graduates and, by extension, the legal community in Rhode Island and beyond. RWU Law is stronger, its graduates are brighter, and the public’s legal needs are better served because of Dean Yelnosky’s unwavering commitment to faculty scholarship, experiential learning and public interest law.”

“Michael has been central to developing this law school’s sense of self since the very beginning. In many ways, he has defined the mission, spirit, and culture of the place.”

~ Michael Donnelly-Boylan, Assistant Dean of Admissions

Recent graduate Braxton Medlin ’20, former president of RWU Law’s Student Bar Association and now an associate at Pannone Lopes Devereaux & O’Gara LLC in Providence, underlined Benjamin’s statement.

“Attending law school was a lifelong dream for me, and Dean Yelnosky helped to make it a reality,” he said. “Dean Yelnosky’s reliable pleasantries, open-heartedness, and welcoming nature largely defined my law school experience. Even if he was in a rush, he never failed to make eye

contact and give a warm smile. When opening up his home and family to students for those famous potlucks and pizza parties, he relished in having a drink and treating us like peers.”

Even in recent times, with troubling social issues reaching a boiling point, Medlin was impressed by Yelnosky’s comportment and leadership.

“Given the complexities of the last several months of his tenure — ranging from a crippling pandemic to a much-too-delayed societal shift in the way the country addresses the issues that plague minority communities in the United States — Dean Yelnosky has personified the meanings of empathy, awareness, sensitivity, and humility,” Medlin said. “These are the essential traits of a great leader, and, more importantly, of a great man.”

Michael Donnelly-Boylen, RWU Law’s Assistant Dean of Admissions, noted that these very characteristics have, in many ways, come to define the law school itself.

“Michael has been central to developing this law school’s sense of self since the very beginning,” he said. “In many ways, he has defined the mission, spirit, and culture of the place. More than anything else, I will miss his tremendous empathy. He has led us with his heart and soul. That, to me, is the legacy of his deanship.”

Ralph Tavares, who joined RWU Law last fall as its new Director of Diversity and Outreach, agreed.

“In the short time I have been a part of this institution, I’ve learned about the deep commitment the school has had in the woven work of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice,” Tavares said. “Where Michael’s predecessor, Dean [David] Logan, created a strong foundation point for the law school to build upon, Michael has created an intricate structure of support for that work to continue. I have encountered very few leaders in my professional career who have understood the complexity of this work, and fewer still who have shown the commitment to long-term change that Michael has embodied.”

Lorraine Lalli, Assistant Dean of Students emphasized the importance of building upon Yelnosky’s work.

“It been great working so closely with Michael for so many years — first when he was associate dean, and later as dean,” she said. “Even today, the challenges facing the law school and our students continue to evolve, and we must continue to innovate to provide the best education and opportunities for our students. Michael always approached our work with a kindness and caring that was unmatched — an approach that always put students at the center. And it is precisely his people-first perspective that I value and admire.”